DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 476 982 IR 021 710

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TITLE	On-Line AACE Forums: Joining, Participating, and Leading.
PUB DATE	2002-06-00
NOTE	6p.; In: ED-MEDIA 2002 World Conference on Educational Multimedia, Hypermedia & Telecommunications. Proceedings (14th, Denver, Colorado, June 24-29, 2002); see IR 021 687.
AVAILABLE FROM	Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE), P.O. Box 3728, Norfolk, VA 23514. Tel: 757-623-7588; e-mail: info@aace.org; Web site: http://www.aace.org/DL/.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Computer Assisted Instruction; *Computer Uses in Education; Curriculum Development; *Distance Education; *Educational Technology; Nontraditional Education; *Online Systems; Teacher Education; *Technology Integration
IDENTIFIERS	*Learning Communities

ABSTRACT

Factors that increase the likelihood of sustainable on-line learning community success fall into four general categories: the selection of an ease of learning and ease of use application permits an adequate default setting to begin operation yet permits users and managers to customize their on-line environment; creation and support of users, moderators, and administrators by providing training and supporting excellent experiences that evolve into an on-line learning culture; both users and managers must believe that content of an on-line group is an added value; and the effort required to participate in an on-line professional group are worth the added effort. Educators more commonly subscribe to the popular idea that face-to-face interactions in a traditional room are the ideal. The majority of teacher education faculty still fails to infuse educational technology procedures into their educational curriculum at substantial levels. The software used at AACE and SITE: is easy for all users to learn; is easy for moderators to learn and manage; dependable and requires little maintenance and is secure; can attach files created with most popular applications; and offers a variety of personalized settings. Examples of personal configuration options include: notification of the creation of new discussion topics being formed in one's favorite areas, subscription to topic threads, hiding topics and conversation areas where one has little interest, and much more. (AEF)

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On-line AACE Forums: Joining, Participating, and Leading

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Attempts to create and sustain on-line professional communities for teacher education have received considerable attention from the press. Frequently, however, on-line groups do not deliver what on-line users want. We can, with reasonable assurance, identify and nurture those factors that increase the likelihood of sustainable on-line learning community success. These factors fall into four general categories. First, the selection of an *ease of learning* and *ease of use* application permits an adequate default setting to begin operation yet permits users and managers to customize their on-line environment. Second, creation and support of users, moderators, and administrators by providing training and supporting excellent experiences that evolve into an on-line learning culture. Third, both users and managers must believe that content of an on-line group is an added value. Fourth, the effort required to participate in an on-line professional group are worth the added effort.

Most educators will admit that the current state of online groups are not as good as they will become (Vail, 2001) and perhaps view on-line groups as another e-mail like media to be managed (Barmann, personal communication, February, 1993). This perspective is due to educators attempting to fit technology into the traditional world without recognizing how on-line interactions can change and add value to lives. In the professional literature one rarely reads that deeper and different learning can happen in an on-line learning community, but it can

Educators more commonly read about and subscribe to the popular idea that face to face interactions in a traditional room are the ideal. In traditional interactions the presenter speaks to the audience. At a conference there is limited interaction and contact over a relatively short time. The use of AACE and SITE professional boards permit and encourage more extensive and longer lasting connections.

Personal interactions involved in face to face learning can be powerful. We must also recognize that an on-line community of collaborating peers where every person sees, discusses, and reacts to thoughts and ideas of individuals within a group can be extremely

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accommodating related to content, as well as time and distance. Participation in on-line professional groups and a skillful use of technology creates more than just a difference in the way we work. It will provide an ubiquitous on-line learning vehicle, a place to express and develop ideas, and provides us with access to a support group of our peers. Such a community is exceedingly powerful. An on-line learning community can add muscle and flexibility to the learning experience. An on-line learning community has the potential to add value to the learning enterprise.

In a recent welcoming address to MIMIC, the Dean of Cleveland State University, Dr. James McLaughlin said it exactly right when he said:

> "Technology has become such an integral part of my life that I wonder how I did without it. I knew that it would allow me to do my work differently. What I did not realize was how it would change my thought processes, professional identity, and communication frequency and style....
>
> I think differently too. Having information at my fingertips allows me to rely on my memory for other things. I scan for the immediately relevant and otherwise store information away for quick retrieval. I am more prone to think ahead than behind. I seem more adventuresome than before."
>
> Delivered MAY 20,2002
> Dr. James McLaughlin, Dean
> College of Education
> Cleveland State University

Most educators still use technology tangentially as an add-on and are not motivated to use professional on-line groups in their professional lives. They too often continue to perceive the use of technology negatively and an effort without adequate incentives or tangible rewards (Schlager, Fusco, and Schank, 1998). The majority of teacher education faculty still fails to infuse educational technology procedures into their educational curriculum at substantial levels.

The point is that, other than using the web for cheap access to free materials, teacher educators seemingly do not recognize that on-line participation in a professional group is beneficial. In many instances, web-based groups and listservs are led by those who have failed to experience sufficient on-line activities to enable them to plan or lead on-line groups. Sometimes there is a failure to continue to maintain the on-line activities once

they were launched. Think about this, how often is webpage content out of date? We believe that when faculty have had few or no positive experiences creating and leading an on-line learning community, they seem to retreat toward teaching the way they were taught, that is, without technology (Schlager, Fusco, Schank,1999).

Whether one is an on-line learning community user or leader, success requires the use of an application that is robust and flexible. At AACE and SITE we use software that:

- is easy for all users to learn
- is easy for moderators to learn and manage
- is dependable and requires little maintenance and is secure
- can attach files created with most popular applications
- offers a variety of personalized settings

Examples of personal configuration options include, notification of the creation of new discussion topics being formed in one's favorite areas, subscription to topic threads, hiding topics and conversation areas where one has little interest, and much more.

Many universities use campus-wide software such as WebCT® or WebBoard® as their solution for web-based content. Both of these applications are excellent. This presentation will reference these applications so that users who are familiar with them can understand functionality of AACE's professional boards.

Initially participants may view on-line groups as being unsatisfying and as an isolated activity. This need not be so. The promise of anywhere, anytime connectivity is becoming a reality. When educators are uninitiated into an on-line culture or they have inadequate training and support the tendency is to retreat from the on-line leadership position. Content flows into AACE and SITE forums participants begin to support each other. Everyone is able to see how others think. This brings up an important point to remember, participation in an on-line professional group is not like sending e-mail. Thoughts should be well crafted and often demand thoughtful reading and pithy (responses requiring deliberation, not just yes or no) replies.

The AACE and SITE professional boards represent an agora, what we would call a forum for open discussions. Agora is an ancient Greek term for an open space where citizens come together for public meetings. An agora was first attributed to Homer and connoted

both a) the assembly of the people or congregation and 2) the actual physical setting. An agora, much the same as what we would think of as a "commons" was regarded as an ordinary element of their life. Every citizen had a voice. These are similar to the learning communities that AACE and SITE are developing on-line.

On-line learning communities will evolve. One must be careful, however, because there are assassins waiting to kill the on-line learning community. Apathy and non-participation is a dangerous thing. When teachers and administrators fail to gradually acquire on-line management knowledge and skills they limit their ability to understand and develop on-line learning communities. When one uses technology one improves speed and range of collaboration and communication. The use of on-line communication applications also exposes charlatans. Cultural readiness may trump some efforts to form on-line learning communities. In the past we have waited 20 years for a new generation of educational leaders. Today we can not wait. We must work to build the educational culture that will support and value on-line knowledge sharing.

When Thomas Carroll (2000) asked the question, "If we didn't have the schools we have today, would we create the schools we have today" he was really asking us to make something different. An electronic on-line learning community is not business as usual. On-line learning communities permit us to share half thoughts and enlist others in their development. It permits others in on the secret and the private information, and makes the whole process more democratic, in part because I can access so many people so easily (McLaughlin, 2002).

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